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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RELATIONS

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RELATIONS

Summary

The International Conference on Human Relations held at Nijmegen, Netherlands, in September, 1956, was organized in five sections: basic research, research applications, philosophical background, "change and resistance to change," institutional aspects. Research papers reported are those by Festinger, Sherif, Ex, Rohrer, Pinto, Singh, and Mailhiot. One outcome of the Conference was the formation of a working committee to establish an International Documentation and Information Center for the field of Human Relations.

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RELATIONS

The International Conference on Human Relations assembled at Nijmegen (Netherlands) September 3-15, 1956, under the high patronage of Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands and the general chairmanship of His Royal Highness the Prince of the Netherlands.

The Conference was organized into five sectional meetings:

- (1) "Fundamental Research into Human Relations;"
- (2) "Interaction Between Research and Application in the Field of Human Relations;"
- (3) "The Philosophical Background of Human Relations;"
- (4) "Change and Resistance to Change in Human Relations;"
- (5) "Organization of Centers for Research and Application in the Field of Human Relations."

In each of these sections, discussion was organized around 47 invited papers. These papers were contributed by representatives of some 18 different countries (twelve of them from the U.S.).

Over 200 persons from 46 countries were in attendance. As would be expected from the title of the Conference, a diversity of professional backgrounds and interests was represented. Despite this diversity, there was much evidence of a world-wide belief that a scientific approach to the solution of problems resulting from human interaction was worthwhile. Perhaps this belief will result in accelerated development of the now scientifically primitive disciplines dealing with problems of human interaction.

In talking with the participants from the various countries I was impressed especially by two facts:

(1) Throughout the world, since World War II, the enrollment of University students in behavioral science courses has paralleled the growth observed in American universities (for example, the University of Mysore, India, now has over 200 students in the psychology program -- with a total university enrollment of less than 2,000); and

(2) There is an almost complete dependence on American textbooks for those courses. The latter fact has led to a considerable influence by contemporary American social science on the approaches and methods used by scientists in other countries. This observation is not followed by the deduction that highly original and important work is not being done outside the United States, for it is. However, the commonality of experimental

design and conceptual tools is impressive. For example, the paper presented by Professor Ram Singh, of the University of Nagpur, on "Changes in Social Structure as They Influence Interpersonal Relations" might well serve as a textbook model on methodology in sociology..

A summary of each of the papers presented to the Conference would not be of general interest, since many of them consisted of reports of institute organization, descriptive reports of human relations programs in industry, value statements of convictions regarding idealized human relations, and so forth. Summarized below are the major papers concerned with reporting the results of research on human relations. Research on "human relations" was defined as research aimed at finding general laws of interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

Professor L. Festinger (U.S.A.) reported a study of interpersonal relations in a group who believed that a second world-cleansing flood was coming. The date of arrival of the expected flood came and went. The net result of the failure of the prophesied flood to materialize was an intensification of the bonds in the nuclear leader group, a rationalization of the failure of the flood's appearance in terms of the "cleansing" effect of the efforts of the nuclear leader group, and a dropping of marginal members from the group. It was possible to test a series of hypotheses, growing out of earlier experimental work, by this "natural" experiment. The study is reported in detail in the University of Minnesota Press publication, When Prophecy Fails (L. Festinger, H.W. Riecken, and S. Schachter. 1954).

Professor M. Sherif (U.S.A.) presented a paper describing his "Robber Cave" Study (reported in the Harper published volume An Outline of Social Psychology. Revised Edition, M. and C. Sherif, 1956). This is a study of a summer camp experiment in which a group of boys, previously unknown to each other, were brought together. By providing tasks requiring shared efforts, two group structures were created; by providing competitive tasks between groups where only one group could win, intergroup tensions were created. These tensions were manifested mainly by hostile acts directed toward the outgroup, with corresponding development of ingroup solidarity. By setting up goals that were superordinate to the interests of the two groups and toward which they worked, the tension was reduced, the hostility disappeared as did much of the ingroup solidarity, and the two groups more or less coalesced into one group.

Professor J. H. Ex (Netherlands) reported a replication of Sherif's famed autokinetic experiment in which the subjects were told that their partner would influence their judgment of perceived distance. Convergence of judgments did occur. On the basis of evidence derived from verbal reports of the subjects it was argued that full explanation of interpersonal experimentation demanded a full phenomenological description of the experiment.

J.H. Rohrer (U.S.A.) reported on a follow-up study of a group of 276 Negroes studied in the mid-thirties by A. Davis and J. Dollard (their study is reported, in part, in their volume Children of Bondage). He reported that ego defense mechanisms (ways of protecting and enhancing self) were stable from adolescence to adulthood, and that dominant defense mechanisms judged by social norms to be undesirable at adolescence (e.g., aggression) may at adulthood be judged socially desirable. The reverse of this generalization also holds. He also reported that his data failed to confirm Kardiner's hypothesis that color-caste leads to self-hate on the part of the Negro. Color-caste restrictions were not as important in determining personality structure as were nuclear family relationships and social class variables.

Professor Pinto (Brazil) summarized a series of studies he had done under the sponsorship of UNESCO on social structure and social change in Brazil. These studies were concerned with the impact of industrialization and modernization (i.e., social change) on the social structure and value systems of the people. He documented neatly the dynamics underlying the notions of "culture change," "culture lag," and how the ideology and values of the older culture delayed adjustment to the new technology. The net result was that members of the society occupied positions of "structural marginality" -- a condition in which the old patterns subsist but no longer prevail and the new one, though present, is not dominant. He then went on to document how this condition of structural marginality produced conflicts in the daily lives of the people; conflict between generations, between social classes, and between ethnic and political groupings.

Dr. Ram Singh (India) presented a paper that complemented Professor Pinto's by showing the types of problems and conflicts produced in another culture as a result of the impact of industrialization. The conflicts were most noticeable in three older strongholds of Indian culture: the village, the joint family, and the caste. Dr. Singh set out to test the following hypotheses:

(1) The degree of resentment, hostility, and conflict created by social changes depends upon the degree of incompatibility of the imported values with the established value system;

(2) The breakdown of the established social traditions gives rise to impulsive and uncertain behavior;

(3) Indian Cultures are moving from an "old age" culture toward a "youth culture," and the gap between physical maturity and emotional maturity is further declining, with the youth experiencing a greater amount of freedom from conformity.

He then proceeded to present data that supported each of the hypotheses. Support for the first hypothesis was derived from data on female migration to urban centers, the greater value placed on education, the demand for freedom of choice of one's mate -- all indirectly resulting from industrialization. These new values were in direct contradiction to the values held in the joint family, and resulted in hostility and conflict between the older and younger members of the culture.

Support for the second hypothesis was based largely on data showing that education and industrial employment had raised the age at which marriage occurred. In the traditional society early marriage assured premarital chastity, but with the increased marriage age premarital relations are increased and emphasis on chastity is decreasing.

Support for the third hypothesis was based upon an analysis of shifting relationships in the family, e.g., relationships between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, the shifting role behaviors of "father" and change in the amount of deference and respect accorded older male siblings in the family.

Father Mailhiot (Canada) reported an experimental study of variables influencing ethnocentricity. In earlier work he had identified three ethnic groups in Montreal holding divergent values (religion, etc.). The general hypothesis tested was that the ethnocentricity of the groups would be reduced by increased communication between groups. He created a group made up of members of a single profession but with different ethnic identifications.

They met in six seminars for face to face discussion of professional problems. "Before and after" measures were obtained of beliefs, stereotypes held, etc., towards the ethnic groups involved. The results showed that the effect of the discussion was to reduce hostility felt towards the outgroups, and to bring about reduction of prejudicial group perceptions of one another.

It was recommended that a second International Conference be held in 1959. Planning for this Conference was delegated to an international working committee who were given the additional responsibility of establishing an International Documentation and Information Center.

Proceedings of the Conference are to be printed and will be available sometime in 1957. Inquiries may be directed to:

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